

Saudi Arabia's Social Commentary Art in Photography

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Photographers have their artistic creativity to express relevant social comments about the global social trend. In this respect, the current Saudi photographers have no exception. Compared to other countries in the West, images which publicize comments towards a society's norm, also known as social commentary, images that have been a part of Saudi's daily life since decades ago were produced as a way of expression. Unfortunately, photography in Saudi Arabia has attracted little scientific and international attention. Thus, this study intended to get a clear picture of the public's point of view on photographic representation and its role in social commentary, portrayal of social comments from Saudi photographers as a way to better understand the ideas, practices and attitudes of Saudi photographic artists. When there are limitation of open criticisms in Saudi, photographers tend to express their thoughts to the public through photography. Photographs were chosen from photographic artists who produce extreme expressions of creations through their photographs. This study provides insight about public understanding on how contemporary photographic artists of Saudi Arabia utilize photographic images to comment on sociocultural circumstances of the country in relation to social norms, cultural manifestations, and politics overall.

Key words: *Art Photography, Social Commentary, Communication, Public Acceptance.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning of the historical evolution of photography as an art form, background of the study has been underscored with a specific focus on the use of photographic art as a tool to make socially relevant and evocative commentary. Background of the study presents an elaborate perspective on the strength and viability of photographic images to express social commentary, which not only captures and depicts what actually exists in the society but also is suggestive of



the needed change. Furthermore, the purview of the background also explains the superior ground that, in comparison to other artistic expressions, photographic representations has in relation to modeling and eliciting actuality of the world as it exists. Additionally, photographers use images to convey broader and socially relevant and evocative comments on the prevalent or desired state of affairs. In this backdrop, current study has been constructed with an object to explore the extent and nature of social commentary that Saudi Arabian photographers make through the products of their camera lenses.

In today's world, photographic images abound all over the media and Internet to the extent that photography has surfaced as a new, robust, and authentic form of artistic expression. Photographers, thought to be people who have more equipment and artistic sense than those who have knowledge to operate a camera, have refined attention as well as acumen to capture whatever intrigues their aesthetic and intellectual faculties, and use their images to convey larger and broader meanings (Cotton, 2009). Photographic art entails a concrete example of how artistic expressions and social trends continue to influence each other. Camera has become one of the most powerful tools and the image has surpassed the 'word' in as much as its power to disseminate real life, evocative, and stirring messages is concerned (Harper, 2002). Where writers and other literary artists have to write down long narratives, punctuate the narrative with substantive argumentation and evidences, and draw logically relevant and convincing conclusions to assert their idea, photographers simply picturize the scenario of their interest and disseminate it. The resultant impact that images harness among public outweigh the narratives, a point that is evident from the ever-increasing usage of photographic images along the written manuscripts in popular media.

Conventional forms of art have long been a crisp tool to comment on prevalent conditions, thoughts, ideations, and cultural context; however, photographic art signify comparatively new, yet most effective form of art through which observant photographers capture real-life images utilizing camera lenses and their keen sense of selection (Edwards, 2012). Despite the criticism on photographic images as lower degree of artistic representation, contemporary photographers rely on this particular field as the most effective and robust means of highlighting social issues and engaging wider public in meaningful discourse. Photographic art, according to Freund (1980), is the concrete example of interaction between artistic expression and social norms. Beyond the advertising purposes in newspapers, images do carry to convey deeper meanings and trigger thinking processes amongst the audience. Since open verbal criticism is not encouraged in Saudi Arabia and is even suppressed methodically and systematically, sane and sensitive individuals use other alternatives to express their views and engage other individuals in social discourse (Edwards, 2012). This study provides insight on how contemporary photographic artists of Saudi Arabia are using photographic images to comment on sociocultural circumstances of the country in relation to social norms, cultural manifestations, and politic overall.

2. METHODS

Open criticisms are limited in Saudi, therefore, photographers choose to vocalize their thoughts to the public through photography. As an overall, art created by Saudi artists serves as a paean to the Saudi culture which has its strong tribal roots with its indigenous norms and mores. Artistic expression of the Kingdom has adapted many forms, including music, painting, poetry, and photography among others. Photographic and picturesque art have gained enormous attention in Saudi Arabian artistic arena due to the exponential interest that Saudi youth has, as well as artists to take in the field (Murphy, 2012). Despite the conservative norms of the Saudi society have been critical of picturizing others and concerns related to individual privacy are of paramount importance in the country, it has become a common observation that people, both males and females to roam around the Kingdom's street holding camera and searching for perfect shots (Murphy, 2012). Popularity and use of smartphone cameras and the increasing use of social media applications, such as Instagram, has further strengthened this trend (Stapleton, 2010). Such interactive platforms allow lay people to become the artist as well as the audience simultaneously and contribute to the ongoing interactive gallery of art. The photographs in this study were chosen from photographic artists who produce extreme expressions of creations through their photographs.

More recently, painting, poetic verses, Art, and photography constitute the most commonly used forms of artistic expression owing much to the explosion of figurative representations, being used all around the specter of marketing, publicity, and even presence (Sontag, 2008). Photographers in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia are also following this course and are contributing their creations to assert a powerful, meaningful and personalized perspective of the 21st century Saudi Arabia. The idea of Saudi identity and the image of Kingdom's culture that Saudi photographers portray are sometime whole, at times under construction, and at others, the one that is being lost (Yaacob, Azahari, & Ismail, 2013). Cumulatively, artists tend to question the idea, nature, and the manifestations of Saudi Arabian social and cultural Identity and seek to correlate, or otherwise, compare it within a broader global context (Amirsadeghi, Keshmirshakan, Irving, & Downey, 2009).

This study focuses on the contemporary, rather than classical photographic art, created by Saudi Arabian photographers, which particularly focus on Saudi society, cultural norms, ways and patterns of living, contemporary social trends, and streams of thought that dominates the minds of Saudi artists as well as general public. Focus on these aspects will help the researcher study the selected images from an interpretative paradigm and observe what commentary artists make through their artistic creations and what their perspective towards modern Saudi Arabia are. The notion of art in contemporary photography in general will be explained at the outset of the study before proceeding to the specific photographic art the Middle East as well as Saudi Arabia. This explanation of the art background will provide substantive foreground to comprehend how, via the medium and the content, selected Saudi photographers express their views and thoughts to comment on the country's society and ways including the thoughts of

Saudi people. Keeping in view about the human and resource limitations, this interpretative analysis focuses on the works of the representative artists of the Saudi Arabian photographic art.

Approaches to understand visual culture and photography

Given that photographic images are reflections of the people's attitudes or happenings that take place in a particular context or society, prior knowledge and experiences of the individuals shape the perspective which they apply for understanding those images. Considering the variations in thinking patterns and knowledge of individuals, interpretations ascribed to the photographic images also vary significantly. Yacoob (2014)(Yaacob et al., 2013) asserts that evaluation and appreciation of an image depends heavily on the existing body of knowledge that a society and its members contain. Barret (2000)(Barrett, 2020) explicates that people take recourse to one or more from four different approaches in their quest to understand and interpret a photographic image.

i. Realism

As is evident from the title, realism connotes the ideas of a school of thought that views objects and events through a realistic lens, an approach that is highly applicable in photojournalism. Szarkowski, as quoted in Yacoob (2014), explains that the realism is based on the premise that the external world functions independent of human intentions and offers multiple discoverable patterns of implied meanings. It is through the identification and discernibility of those patterns in such a way that they offer a unique and reflective model for understanding that humans seek to understand a social phenomenon. For realists, the world is full of standardized truths and the artists' task is to portray that beautiful truth in its most or near to accurate perspective that underscores all the variations it may contain (Ismail, 2010).

ii. Expressionism

Expressionists focus majorly on the individuality of the artist and pay regard to the manner and techniques of expression that the artist utilizes in conveying one's ideas. Regarding artist's experience and knowledge as the foundation pillar of art-making, expressionists assert that viewers should interpret art in relation to the manner and intensity of the feelings that the artist inculcates in it (Barrett, 2020).

iii. Formalism

Formalism focuses in the autonomy of art and is closely associated with the modernist movement of the twentieth century in art and literature. Asserting that the art is meant for the art-related purposes, formalists highlight the importance of presenting abstracts, rather

than invoking direct references to the existing world as asserted by the realists. Considering form of the art and its subject matters of greater importance, formalism focuses on the sovereignty of art forms irrespective of the non-art forms.

iv. Instrumentalism

Instrumentalism concerns itself with the didactic and reflective aspects of the art as it encourages that individuals should examine art in context of social, economic, and moral purposes. Furthermore, it highlights the manner in which a particular society consumes art along with its implications, and regards the art as subservient to the social concerns, rather than having any independence as stressed by the formalists. Thus, instrumentalists acknowledge the importance and relevance of the message that an art-piece conveys acting itself as an instrument or a communication tool.

3. DISCUSSION

Historical Perspective of Social Commentary

Humans has a powerful urge and are endowed with the tools to contemplate on their surroundings, process the information according to their subjective experiences and accumulated knowledge, and express the reaction through any of the forms of expressions, whether verbal, artistic, or skill-based feat (H., 2013). Earlier instances of meaningful social commentary date back to the Chaucerian era (1340 – 1450), when the earliest of the Anglo poetic geniuses used words as brushes and painted a vivid yet true picture of the vices that people belonging to different professions have in their hidden self in Prologue to Canterbury Tales. Though Canterbury Tales were narrative descriptions, and were neither pictures nor paintings, yet all of the 26 poems portray multitude of colors and shades that impart specific traits to the human characters. Since then, the showcase of social understanding and thinking has become an objective to be cherished for social-sensitive group of artists (H., 2013).

Continuing with the tradition of focusing on the lives of common people, far removed from the historical traditions of projecting nobility's and ecclesiastical lives, Charles Dickens' (1812-1870) periodicals and novels, titled as "Household Words" project the everyday routines and discourses of English people (Yaacob et al., 2013). This course of expression for subjective as well as rational commentary on the prevailing norms and mores, social values, was soon accompanied with the pictographic depictions, either on the cover page or along the text soon after the camera started producing vivid and reprint-able images. Relying upon the notion of seeing is believing, captured scenery of household settings, rural landscape, urban fabric, and almost every other human or natural interaction became well-received subjects of the photography. According to Wright (2013):



"The popular notion that seeing is believing had always afforded special status to the visual image. So, when technology was invented, in the form of photography, the social and cultural impact was immense. Not only did it hold out the promise of providing a record of vision but it was able to make such a representation enduring."

Realistic orientation of a captured scenes or events imbues photographic images with a power dimension that elicits a semblance, and most of the time, true depiction of the truth (Intraub & Bodamer, 1993). Azahari (2011) asserts that photography projects the world as it really is, and that with the advanced cameras, sophisticated lens operations, and developed skill set of photographers, artistic images convey, photographs portray intensive observations and wholesome clarifications, on the part of the larger scene that has been kept in the frame (Yaacob, 2015). As representation presentation of the reality, photography is powerful enough to carry multiple layers of meanings feelings emotions and expressions which are strengthened by the photographers' skill, equipment, and artistic acumen (Yaacob et al., 2013). As a vocation, photography becomes the most powerful form of self-expression for the photographer who captures his or her predominant feelings and emotions in form of photographer imagery. Some artists use photography to convey their knowledge and expertise by capturing and disseminating common circumstances and scenarios in their best possible expression, voice, and scene choice (Villi, 2012). Johnson and Johnson (1989) elucidates multiple roles that photography plays in human life, not merely as representation of reality but also as a past time, as a means of expression, and the tool to convey deeper than surface meanings to the larger audience. Coupled with these attributes, is the capacity of photographers to capture sophisticated images using high-end lenses and record and store multiple images with significant ease (Yaacob et al., 2013). Furthermore, in today's era of social media, photographic communication has become a means of communications in itself, a phenomenon that developers of SnapChat – a social networking mobile application which uses photo and video as the main medium– revamp a new meaning to (Rice, 2011; Vitz, 1966).

Photography with a Message

Comparing the photography with other pictorial expressions, such as realistic and landscape paintings, the former portends a higher notion of reality with all the contents of a scene clearly traceable to the actual phenomenon. Newbury (1995) regards the mechanical transcription of reality as the most powerful element of photography which lend this particular art epitome of clarity and vividness. Newbury (1995) also highlights the lack of human intervention in the shaping of the photographic artworks. Among the pioneer proponents of photographic art, are Barthes (1964) and Sontag (2008), who favored the photography as a feat of subjective representation of reality, bearing utmost resemblance as well as evocative force. To Sontag (2008), photography is an act of non-intervention, in which mere mechanical process captures the scene and represents the present conception of reality in its totality. Sontage's conception



of photography excludes human intervention to the core and attributes the artistic features of photography to the technical feat of camera and lens.

Photographs are immobile representation of lived reality. Sontag (2008) further maintains that in relation to the immobility, there is a perverse confusion between the real and the live, which are not same yet one is the representation of the other. Photographic representation equivocates that the real exists, whereas, in addition to that, the image surreptitiously suggests that the real is alive (Yaacob, 2015). However, Sontag (2008) also explicates that, essentially, photographs retract the reality to the delusion past, suggesting that the reality captured in the image has already been dead and obsolete. Nonetheless, images preserve the dead or, in other words, inkling of the past to make it live as long as the images do not perish. As an emanation of the referent scene, Barthes (1964) observes that, photography emanates a magic and re-envisioning of the past, which is analogous to the existential reality which persevered in the past and has left a trace in the form of a reminiscent.

Contrary to the exclusion view, as held by Sontag (2008) and Barthes (1964), no form of art, whether created through mechanical means or otherwise, could forego the subjective element that the performer, creator, or in this case, photographer presents to the world. It is the creator's perspective that is echoed through the artwork; however, the presentation of this subjective idea demands comprehensive knowledge as well as aesthetic acumen to enrich the artwork with necessary attributes (Bojko, 2000). Additionally, perceptions and opinions of the artists owe much to their past experiences which, in unison with their knowledge of the world shapes their sense of reality. Photographers have a keen and robust sense of experiencing changes in daily life, and how one conceptualizes the idea of reality in a scene is dependent on the artist (Sandbye, 2012). This individualistic conception determines the angle and perspective that a photographic artist would accord to the selected scene, and it is the angle as well as perspective that imbues certain meaning or at least a sense to the images (Vitz, 1966).

As for interpretations, subjective experiences, knowledge, and worldview of the audience determines the extent and scope of interpretation that each of the individual would attribute to the photograph. These variations in the interpretation begin with the artist's self-image, spans over mood and aptitude of the photographer at the time of capturing the image, and continues to shape and reshape in the minds and intellects of the audience (Ballenger, 2014). As the image continues to proliferate and broader spectrum of audience digests its content, new and new interpretations surface, a phenomenon that further portends the idea of variational schema that individuals apply to understand and react to the same photograph (Yaacob et al., 2013). Such a distinctive perspective to digest, understand, and explain the content as well as theme of a photograph presents the venue for expressing how one perceives the scene and its implications, including causations.

Among recent and more modern usages of photography, photojournalism and documentary photography has gained much more attention as systematic and organized form of expression.



Notably, photojournalism relies on the strength of photography to represent the evidentiary value of the scene of journalists' interest as well as the one which may have some color of news value. O'Brien and Sibley (1988) maintain that due to the enormity of overlapping techniques, subject matter, and artists' style, photojournalism and documentary photography can hardly be distinguished from each other. Both documentary photographers and photojournalists use similar equipment and, more importantly, their subject of interest also remains more or less similar as both seek to focus on the exotic (Orvell, 2012). Both of the key attributes of photography – realism and representation – dominate in documentary photography as well as in the photojournalism, with slight variation in the intensity of a single element. Both of these forms of artistic expression assume the stature of communication, used as a medium to channel sentiments and ideas of the photographer to the rest of the world. Azahari (2011) asserts that photographic creations are mere means of entertainment or education, rather they enjoin the audience to interpret and analyze contents of the image and construct their subjective sense of the theme that the artists have presented through camera lens. Notably, a captivating photograph elicits imminent appreciation from the onlooker; however, as much as the photographer ponders over the image, new and new layers of meaning surface in their cognition (Chapnick, 1994). These new meanings may relate to the feeling, emotions, apprehensions, and even anguish and sorrow and, thereby, complement the feeling that an individual may have at the time or afterwards seeing the photograph (Orvell, 2012).

Photography and Social Commentary

Contemporary discourse on art highlights the significance and prevalence of the social commentary in the artistic expressions and regard the art as the most powerful medium to express thoughts and ideas on culture, politics, and social norms of the society (Ballenger, 2014; Orvell, 2012). Almost every medium of traditional or historical art, such as literature, painting, sculpture, music, and ceramics, among many others, showcases the artists' subjective opinions and worldviews about current events (Pettersson, 2011). Though traditionally such commentary – different forms of art – has been concerned around the aggrandizement of the nobility at the cost to total ignorance of the common people, modern art has shifted its focus towards the lives and circumstances of common people, and thereby, the art has gained more expansive and themes as well as material (Ballenger, 2014).

Visual representation of important and awe-invoking scenes and events accompany the notion of believability; thereby, inciting strong response from the audience. For instance, visual portrayal of anti- and pro-war perspectives during Vietnam War in the USA accompanied with battlefield imagery moved the sentiments of American public enormously, culminating in a civil strife and initiation of peace talks. Likewise, visuals of the Twin Towers being demolished in terrorist attacks led to the initiation of aerial attacks on Afghanistan and prepared public of the USA and other allied countries to favor the Afghanistan mission. Likewise, more recent instance of the use of imagery for initiating sociopolitical change can be understood from the



recent Arab Spring where a number of Arab countries faced strong agitation and resistant from the masses to change the regime (Dickerman, 2016). In a book, *Discordia*, Arab photographer Moises Saman presents extensive narrative details on how images of the novel ways of protest strongly influenced the minds of those who were initially neutral. Use of smartphone cameras empowered the protestors to capture scenes on the street and propagate those images through social media (Dickerman, 2016; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013). Wolfsfeld et.al (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013) explain that transmission of evocative and inspiring imagery through social media gave a new and powerful impetus to the anti-regime movements across the Arabian Peninsula and created a politically intense environment in which the power corridors had to listen to the demands and concerns of the agitators. Thus, it is evident from the Civil Rights Movement and Arab Spring that sociopolitical activism in modern times takes enormous advantages offered by visual messages in form of socially relevant and meaningful photographs. Moss (2008) asserts that social commentary photography is ripe with visualization of the true message that the photographer desires to transmit into the cognitions of audience, and he does so by transforming the existing reality into visually appealing images that harness an explicit, or in certain cases, subliminal interaction between their prior experiences and visually communicated reality.

Socially Evocative Photography in Saudi Arabia

Contemporary recognition of the photography as an art also regulated the meanings and messages that photographic imagery can convey. Resultantly, Artists have been given a bold new push to capture evocative and speaking images, especially those that depict socio-cultural, political, and personal styles and experiences (Cravero, 2017). In conformity to the religious and cultural norms and boundaries, photographers paid attention towards the rich and jubilant norms of the oil rich and festive land of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Additionally, impressed largely by the progressive movement that is permeating culture and policy sphere, Photographic art has been used by Saudi artists as a well-targeted medium to share their thoughts and observations on modern society (Murphy, 2012).

In a narrative article written for *Culture Trip Magazine*, Flores (2015) asserts that, despite the establishment of contemporary Saudi Arabia in 1932, it is only recently that the country has witnessed a local art scene (BBC, 2014). Nonetheless, Artists with cameras that are mindful of the sociocultural manifestations of the world today use the camera to depict what they see. Moreover, artists make a substantive use of lesser focus on eloquent scenes, deliberately, in order to tone their social commentary in acceptable and smooth expression (Rothman, 2012). Artists in Saudi Arabia struggle not only with the delicate expression of their views on sociocultural patterns, norms, and manifestations, but also with the topic of just how much feelings can be articulated in a strict censorial system.

This review focuses on the works of 4 artists. Selection on these artists has been carried out using a generalized criterion, comprising their contributions, involvements and efforts in projecting, exhibiting, and propagating social commentary photography. Notably, the selection

includes artists, such as Ahmed Mater, who is a pioneer of Saudi's photographic art. He is considered as one of the most influential of Saudi contemporary artists. In 2003, he cofounded "Edge of Arabia", an independent arts initiative dedicated to promoting the appreciation of contemporary Arab art and culture, with a focus on Saudi Arabia; as well as the modern Saudi artists, such as Tasneem Al-Sultan, Manal Al-Dowayan and Norah-Al-Armri. This variation in the selection of artists is deliberate as the study seeks to capitalize on the difference of opinion between the old and new artists. All these artists have their works exhibited in art galleries, public spaces, and even Internet and social media. Tasneem Al-Sultan and Norah Al-Amri, for instance, have had their photographic artwork displayed officially by photographic clubs and art organizations internationally; Manal has headed numerous public commissions, granted not only by KSA government and private entities but also International arts-groups. Her artworks are featured in Solo, Annual, Biennial, and Group exhibitions regularly, while she consistently has been delivering lecture series in many universities, symposiums, and other arts and leadership related events.

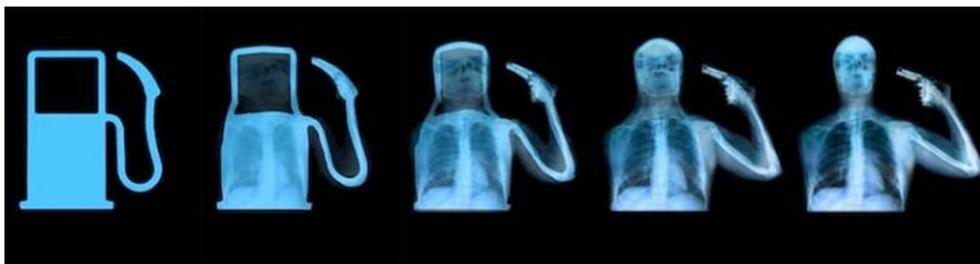


Figure 1. *Evolution of Man* by Ahmed Mater

Nonprofit organizations, such as Edge of Arabia, are working earnestly to limelight and promote culture and values of the Middle East in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. The 2015 Focus edition of The Armory Show – a prestigious art fair where each year a curated section brings to light cultural and artistic landscape of a particular region – premiered art and artistic climate of the middle east, north Africa, and Mediterranean (MENAM) region.

Ahmed Mater's *Evolution of Man* (2010), on display at 2015 Amory Show, addresses oil rich Kingdom's over reliance on oil, regarding it as path to self-destruction (Figure 1). Mater presents a vocal indictment of his country and portrays a, x-rays series of images on a light box. In a little earlier work, Mater directs public attention towards abstract concepts and portrays religious rites in terms of scientific notion of *Magnetism* (Figure 2). Mater's *Magnetism* signifies the concept of 'tawa'af' in which believers converge from all over the world and walk around the Ka'ba.



Figure 2. *Magnetism* by Ahmed Mater

Similarly, female photographers, such as Manal Al Dowayan are also expressing their sentiments and opening new horizons of discussion on social issues such as gender role, equality, place of women in Saudi society, and social norms.



Figure 3. *Esmi – My Name* by Manal Al Dowayan

Religion, religious teachings, strong value system, and, most of all, the sense of being host country to the Muslim World' sacred entities keeps the artistic climate of the country deeply entrenched in religious zeal. Likewise, Manal Al Dowayan's *Esmi – My Name* (Figure 3) not only capture the high Islamic values by depicting Burqa-clad women in background of larger-than-life strings of prayer beads. Noticeably, each of the bead features name of a woman and might be signifying status of women in the country. Al Dowayan herself expressed in an interview that she had a long-cherished disdain towards female names and that the concept that the names have origin in Islam and religious roots appears unfounded to her. To her conception, placement of women's names on beads signifies a reassurance of sanctification drive.



Figure 4. *If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me* by Manal Al Dowayan

Manal's *If I Forget You, Don't Forget Me* is a collection that documents the lived memories of oil-families with the object to recreate past as it had been at its time of occurrence. This very project enlivens the memories of her father's generation in a technical hybridization that blurs the distinctive boundaries that tend to separate the installations, photograph, and the object. Likewise, Manal has picturized life, circumstances, feelings, as well as anguish in which families of men working in oil industry lead their lives. With a particular interest on the lives and living situations of the women, she contends that women's life and social progress in Saudi Arabia remains influenced under the impact of numerous social and religiously instituted obstacles; thus, they have a limited horizon available to rise high on social and political development. Manal has explicitly highlighted this situation in her multiple art projects with the objective to educate and illuminate the masses and pave way for conducive reformation regarding the opportunities available to Saudi females in the country.



Figure 5. *Riders in Preparation* by Tasneem Al-Sultan.

Among many other artists who focus upon urban life, culture, and aspirations of Saudi Arabian people, Tasneem Al-Sultan pays attention to the modernistic trends which show an utterly progressive side of the Saudi life. In an interview with the Arab News, she asserts that she wanted to provoke people, trigger their thinking processes, and make them feel and think. Her speaking images of women driving cars on Saudi streets, rejoicing on concerts, entering actively in soccer arenas, and working as professionals in public sector have earned as the recognition of an emerging stalwart on the Saudi society.

For instance, her *Riders in Preparation* (Figure 5) features members of Harley-Davidson club, located in Al-Khobar region. The picture, taken few days before the grant of permission to drive for females, shows male members of the club clad in riding costumes and signaling the move, while a female bike rider appears to be dwelling in thoughts. Likewise, *Tea Time* (Figure 6) also depicts the serenity and transformational trends of the modern urban Saudi Arabia. *Tea Time* depicts the epitome of contemporary interior designing under which a mixture of antique and modern is employed to impart a sense of serenity and elegance.



Figure 6. *Tea Time* by Tasneem Al-Sultan

Driving Lesson (Figure 7) is also another evocative photograph by Tasneem Al-Sultan in which a Saudi male is teaching driving lesson to his wife. The picture was originally shared by the husband himself who narrated a number of adversarial comments from different users in reaction to his post. Admittedly, it was a queer happening in male dominated patriarchal society where females have long been not granted the right to drive.



Figure 7. *Driving Lesson* by Tasneem Al-Sultan

Norah Al Amri has published a catalogue named See My Culture that features traditional as well as modern aspects of KSA culture and polity. In a more recent catalogue, titled Bridges to KSA, she has featured colors of Saudi Arabia. She has also collaborated her works for group exhibitions and featured in Phonart Saudi - Every Possible Angel, held in Riyadh by Misk Art group in 2018; Phonart Saudi exhibition arranged by Designers Hub in Tiyadh in 2016; Reconnecting Art by Brighton Photo Fringe in Brighton, United Kingdom in 2016; and Kingdom of Colours- Saudi Art Days at Linwood Dunn Theatre of Los Angeles, USA. Her impactful images have won international acclaim and she has won International Women's Photographers Award and Saleh Al-Azzaz Award in 2019.



Figure 8. *Black is My Color (1)* by Norah Al-Amri



Figure 9. *Black is My Color (2)* by Norah Al-Amri



Figure 10. *Black is My Color (3)* by Norah Al-Amri



Figure 11. *Black is My Color (4)* by Norah Al-Amri

Norah utilizes dress as a strong symbol for highlighting the situation surrounding Saudi women in her hallmark photography project *Black is My Color* (Figure 8-11). Black abaya or the veil cloth has been associated impliedly with the unequitable social standing that Saudi women have in the Kingdom. The images juxtapose archeological aesthetics with the black apparel of



the Saudi female as an insignia that seeks to glorify the culture and social norms of the country. Norah has a keen outlook on day to day life and she is a remarkable observer. Her observational acumen is so powerful that she readily finds and capture spontaneity and flow of the routine life as it proceeds through the wheel of time. Admittedly, artistic minds and senses are mostly sharp enough to go beyond what meets the eye. Likewise, Norah photographs convey multilayered meanings and unearth seemingly un-obvious aspects of the scene that she captures. Notably, she avers that her photographs are mostly pictorial representations of the imaginations and the ideas that strike her mind. To her, photographers as well as the artists have a beyond surface ideation of their creation which trigger their imagination and they find something extraordinary in seemingly ordinary objects.

Representing the Urban

A broad literature from a number of disciplines has looked at how cities are portrayed in different visual media, including film, architectural drawings, photography, and paintings. In general, this research explores how visual images represent and re-articulate discourses about the modern world (Vitz, 1966). The photographs analyzed in this body of work are usually created by professional visual art creators such as architects, visual directors, creative solutions executives, photographers, or music artists (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Researcher and scholars in this field study visual work and interprets it to show how it reflects a particular understanding of the city. In relation to the region, photography has been used in a variety of ways. Some of the earliest images of cityscapes tend to be highly detailed as the aim of producing these images is to record a moment or event (Vitz, 1966).

Many urban construction projects in Europe and its colonies, for example, were recorded by photographers in late 1800s, who captured both the old parts of the cities being demolished and the process of constructing the new infrastructure that replaced them (Cravero, 2017). Although many European photographers traveled to capture the beauty of colonial cities, photographic innovations were quickly adopted by photographers around the world, who created their own vision to interpret urbanism (Vitz, 1966). This practice is carried on into future centuries, maintaining the same objective which is to film the evolution of urban sceneries. The use of camera is however of subjective beauty. While the action of photography typically means the non-changing sequence of pointing the lenses, managing the camera's functions and lastly producing an image, Elizabeth Edwards discussed about the underlying factor of creating a photography in the first place: since late 1800s, people had been desperate to record daily socio-cultural and socioeconomic activities in order to paint a bigger picture of the centuries' urban and rural changes (Flores, 2015).

The relationship between photography and other visual technologies and the city is much more complicated, than the relationship between two clear and knowledge-rich entities, such as the "camera" that photographs the "city" [14]. A picture could catch, maintain and explain the

multiple facets of the city. As scholars of the urban world, it is important that the photograph could inspire the audience from a theoretical and conceptual perspective. To put it clearly, photography has three major relationships with the city: representation, evocation, and performance, so photography could act as a mirror of urbanscape in different ways. Each of these relationships necessitates a distinct analytical approach from social scientists interested in the use of visual technology to research urban spaces (Chapnick, 1994; Flores, 2015). Photographs, when acting as a tool of representation, necessitate comprehension in order to decipher their purpose; when acting as a tool of evocation, photographs involve artistic sensibility so that the meaning behind a shot could be perceived more accurately (Wright, 2013).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study sheds light on the body of literature and photographic creations by Saudi artists which carry any socially relevant messages and commentary. Admittedly, the country and its conservative norms have been a recurrent factor behind the slow pace progress of the photographic art in the KSA; however, a large number of modern photographers have spearheaded this particular art field and are producing socially relevant, meaningfully rich, and eloquent photographic images. These artistic creations, engage the local as well as foreign audiences to experience the local norms and mores as conveyed by the artists using camera lens.

All selected Saudi photographic artists – Ahmed Mater, Manal Al-Dowayan, Tasneem Al-Sultani, Norah Al-Amri – have gained significant recognition across the photographic art creations through their vocal creations. Major themes that Saudi photographic artists use in their artworks revolve around Saudi social practices, cultural norms, gender roles, place and need of modernity, globalism, and social awareness among others. Saudi Arabia's reluctant and gradual transition toward an open society is also a major theme for Saudi artists, especially for the female photographers, including Tasneem Al-Sultan. The culture of ornate and feminine beauty subsumes into women behind the steering wheel in Saudi streets and young girls participating in road biking clubs. Likewise, influx of modernity in infrastructure, architecture, recreational events, and general public life also provide substantive material to the Saudi artists for creating socially relevant and meaningful art.

To involve the public in conversation, the role of photography in media relations should be more prominent. The technological standard of photographic images that hold messages and meanings in the picture should be refreshed in order to divert the public's interest in a common direction and also to turn a situation into a more environmentally responsive one for the society. It is possible to support photographers and encourage them to produce images that can raise society's awareness of some social issues and social problems. With that, social commentary photography has its relevance, and place in the modern art climate of Saudi Arabia which could be exhibited with pride.



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